

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Adele Ginzberg's Sukkah

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Such a luscious array of branches and gourds proudly displayed by Adele Ginzberg—wife of JTS Talmud professor Louis Ginzberg—as she prepared to once again adorn the JTS sukkah!

This photo from The JTS Library evokes for me the loving care with which many early twentieth-century JTS faculty wives cultivated religious spirit and community. Ginzberg, or Mama G. as she was known, inherited the JTS sukkah project from Mathilde Schechter. For decades, she raised funds, shopped, and supervised the sukkah's decoration with fresh fruits, vegetables, and greenery. Louis Finkelstein, JTS president at the time of the photo, noted that seeing it so adorned was “among the high points of my life during the whole year.” The large JTS sukkah now carries her name, in tribute to this dedication.

Known for her vivacious personality, warmth, and irreverence, Mama G. was a constant presence in the JTS community, attending her husband's lectures and Shabbat services. She was also known for opening her home to the JTS community, especially to “her boys”—i.e., rabbinical students. After her husband's death in 1953, she continued to host students for meals until shortly before she died in 1980 at the age of 93.

The younger woman in the photo is undoubtedly someone Mama G. mentored, perhaps someone she taught how to lead with a clear sense of purpose, fearlessness, wholeheartedness, and good humor. I identify with this woman, as I was privileged to be among the last students who fell under Mama G.'s spell. My late husband and I had the honor of walking her to shul weekly as she regaled us with JTS lore., I'll never forget her homemade apple pie, which she served every Shabbat.

This year, as we enter our sukkot, let's stop for a moment to recall the outsized impact that so many women have played over the years in nurturing the aesthetic beauty and warmth of the Jewish spirit. **See the photo in high definition at www.jtsa.edu/adele-sukkah.**

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TORAH FROM JTS



Hol Hamoed Sukkot 5777

חול המועד סכות תשע"ז



Face to Face

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay, Associate Dean,
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We've lost touch with how to speak with one another. How else can we understand our current political reality?

Seemingly overnight, our national conversation has sunk into a morass of racism, classism, Islamophobia, and misogyny. And yet it didn't happen overnight. We created—and allowed to be created—a system that encourages each of us to demonize anyone from a different background and with a different perspective. We got used to interacting only with people who agree with us. We got used to dismissing anyone whose perspective was different by saying they were stupid, uneducated, “didn't get it.” We were the enlightened ones. Everything became about “we” and “they.”

Over the last several weeks, JTS rabbinical students, faculty, and administrators have been collaborating with a grassroots organization called Exodus Transitional Community. Exodus is a reentry program whose mission is to “provide supportive services to formerly incarcerated men and women in order to help them reintegrate into their communities, thereby achieving social and economic well-being and breaking the cycle of recidivism.”

Together with Union Theological Seminary, we have launched a nonpartisan voter registration drive. This voter registration drive created the opportunity to speak in a deep way with people whom we don't always encounter. Exodus Transitional Community, located in East Harlem, is two miles away from JTS. Two miles. Most people in the United States need to travel more than two miles from home to do anything. Yet these two miles might as well be a world away. In 2007, the *Daily News* referred to this neighborhood as “convict alley.” At that time, one in 20 men from East Harlem was being sent to prison. After

servicing their sentences, those men would return from prison to a neighborhood where poverty was rife and job prospects were nonexistent. Exodus opened in this community to work with people as they return from prison, helping them find and succeed in jobs and participate in group counseling. Participants become mentors: many members of Exodus's current staff were formerly incarcerated themselves.

As our team from JTS worked with Exodus staff and participants, inviting East Harlem residents to register to vote, we heard numerous perspectives. Many people told us they didn't think their vote counted or mattered. "The system doesn't care" about them, they said. They "need to just try to stay out of trouble." "13 families control the country and it's just a facade that our votes count." These are the statements of people who feel powerless and disenfranchised. Listening to these comments, you could have thought that nothing government does has any impact at all on their lives.

Mostly we heard from people with whom we don't usually speak about what matters most to them—and we talked about what matters most to us. We might nod and smile as we pass each other on the street, though mainly we live in a society in which that almost never happens.

Sukkot offers us the opportunity to begin to repair the situation. It obliges us to build a temporary shelter, to create a dwelling in which God can dwell with us. The sukkah is fragile. It reminds us that a bad storm can knock us over. It puts us all on a similar playing field. No matter how much money you have, you can't build a kosher sukkah that is permanent. Accumulated privilege doesn't build a stronger or better sukkah. Sukkot is an annual reminder that each of us is fragile, as is our place in the world. It's an opportunity for empathy.

In addition to helping us experience the fragility of life, on Sukkot we have a tradition of inviting in *ushpizin*, guests who, in our tradition, represent uprootedness. Traditional *ushpizin* were famous biblical characters who had been forced to overcome adverse circumstances that included being uprooted.

Immediately preceding the Torah portion we read on Shabbat Hol Hamoed Sukkot, we find this verse:

וְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים כְּאִשֶּׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ

Then the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a person would speak to his neighbor or companion. (Exod. 33:11)

Face to face, as a person would speak to his companion. This, the Torah teaches, is how we speak to our neighbors, our community, people we know and people we don't. It's the opposite of how we have been speaking with each other lately.

Over the last few weeks, registering people to vote, we've been speaking to people face to face. We've tried to engage in these conversations without preconceived notions and without judgment. Frequently that was difficult. I heard stories that have stayed with me: Young adults who grew up in foster care, who struggle daily to stay out of trouble, and for whom any day they aren't in trouble is success. People experiencing homelessness who were excited to know they could still register to vote, claiming a park location or a shelter as their residence. Many people who are on parole and cannot vote. Many people who didn't have any idea when they'd be eligible to register because they'd become accustomed to having their rights taken away. I was left thinking about their stories and the ways in which we as a society have failed them, and ourselves.

This year, Sukkot occurs just before what might be the most significant election of our lifetimes. No matter how this election turns out, may we use this Sukkot to commit ourselves to speaking with our neighbors and friends face to face; to look them in the eye and find out what matters most to them; and to tell them what matters most to us. May we take this holiday to welcome guests who are really different from us into our sukkot. May we focus, like our tradition suggests, on people who have been uprooted in some way, and may we, like Moses and God, speak face to face.

Face-to-face encounters won't solve all of our problems, but they will create the foundation for the work of building a more just and civil society—a task that depends on each of us participating.

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